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The Re-articulation of Meaning of National Monuments: Beyond Apartheid

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Abstract

This article offers a review and critique of the debates which have taken place on the subject of national monuments and their symbolism in South Africa. The authors offer a semiotic revision of the historical material context within which these debates have occurred. Thereafter they review the existing policies and policy implementation structures for national monuments in South Africa, drawing on their theoretical analysis to clarify the dynamics which have led to the present imbalances in public symbolic representation. They conclude by offering a series of comparative examples of symbolic reconstruction from Bulgaria and Zimbabwe, closing with a consideration of the political and legislative needs which have to be faced by legislators in a context of democratic reconstruction and cultural reconciliation.

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Introduction

This study deals with one site of meaning-making, that of national monuments. We define `monument' as a deliberately built or preserved structure or image which is made to represent or denote a specific historical experience considered significant in terms of the evolution of a people's identity. Monuments are symbols of historically discursive and contested contexts in the life and development of groups and nations. The study illuminates ways in which historical, social, cultural and political discourses in South Africa have been represented through monuments.

Explanatory Concepts

All societies justify and flaunt their existence through signs. Signs assist individuals and society in meeting the ultimate problems of identity and destiny. They serve to affirm and justify certain material and historical conditions. Monuments, like religious and other political symbols, are signs standing for abstract processes. Under apartheid, monuments were part of the material re-arrangement of history necessary for the rationalisation of oppression.

It is important to understand how meanings are made and remade, shifted, reinterpreted and revised through divergent uses of signs in society. Historical experiences out of which the same images or discourses have emerged, account for variances in use. In South Africa, Christianity, as one illustration, has been appropriated by ideologues from all shades of political opinion, from the far right to the far left.

The power of religion becomes the religion of power. Religion is represented by sets of symbols (words, objects, visual signs, ritual actions etc) that assist an individual or group in meeting the ultimate problems of identity and destiny. Civil religion denotes the religious dimension of the state. As such, it is associated with the exercise of power and the constant regeneration of the social order. Through religion political action finds transcendant justification (Moodie 1975:295). The aesthetics of some monuments is derived from religious forms of ritual.

All Afrikaner monuments were used during the apartheid era as means of political mobilisation through the religious and racial discourses of Afrikanerdom. One such physical (as well as discursive) site is the Voortrekker Monument near Pretoria. Annual screenings on December 16 at this Monument between 1916 and 1961 of films like **De Voortrekkers / Winning a Continent** (1916)[1], amongst other forms of ritual expression recounting stories of Afrikaner struggles, played a significant role in rituals of first, resistance to English capital, and later, affirmation of the Afrikaner victory over British imperialism. Thus cultural industries, nationalism and white Afrikaner political mobilisation interlocked, if somewhat conflictually, in the interests of emergent Afrikaner Nationalist trends after 1910 (Tomaselli 1983; 1986; 1993).

[1]. December 16 celebrated a Voortrekker victory in 1838 over the Zulu army commanded by Dingaan. See Tomaselli (1986) for a discussion of how films made by English-South African capital, the Schlesinger Organisation, were appropriated for Afrikaner Nationalist ends by being screened annually at the Voortrekker Monument on December 16, known as the Day of the Vow.

Articulation

The phenomenon whereby the ideas, religions and language of one constituency is encoded into discourse is known as **articulation**. When these articulations are appropriated by a second constituency to serve an entirely different set of imperatives, they are being **re-articulated**. In considering `race' in America, for example, it is necessary to consider the history of discourses - social concepts and language - about race and racism. During the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s, '60s and '70s, race was articulated partly within the hegemonic white American liberal discourse, in which access to `civil rights' was the outer limit to demands for social justice by moderate black leaders like Martin Luther King. This largely dislocated - or **disarticulated** - American civil rights discourse from any sustained idea or practice of politics led by radical or socialist working class considerations.

The historical discourses of `race' in South Africa have to be understood as more than struggles over access to civil rights. Until 1990, blacks under apartheid rule had few civil rights, just as dispossessed white Afrikaners under British colonial rule were brutally subjugated. But beyond a desire for social justice was the 1980s popular discourse of a radical class transformation of South African society as a whole. This leftward articulation was also connected with the notion of a grassroots `democracy', defined in stark contrast to the way the term was articulated to the right in America following Reagan's victory in 1980. The Reaganite articulation of democracy was acutely anti-socialist, imperialist and racist. This new right-wing meaning bore little similarity to the meanings it carried in popular democratic struggles and ideologies in Third World countries, and South Africa in particular.

Ideology

`Ideology' is interpreted as the way in which `society' enters the `mind' through signs (Vološinov, 1973:11 & 39). In South Africa during the 1950s, for example, the material interests of the alliance of the Afrikaner petit-bourgeoisie, workers and land-owners required that the political economy be re-ordered in accordance with their (overlapping) economic interests. This took the form of `concrete' change such as the forced re-settlement of blacks into racial group areas; job segregation and protection; and the transfer of wealth from English-speaking capitalists to the Afrikaner-dominated state/bureaucratic sector. This material re-ordering was accompanied by a `subjective' or discursive rearticulation of:

a) rationalisation through language for this material exploitation; plus

b) the `perceptual' changes occurring as a matter of course due to the new material rearrangement (eg. the perception of living in a `white' world where blacks only `entered' as servants and labourers).

Apartheid as a social order, geography and language was filtered by the state's media planners, media and propagandists into the minds of South Africans and the West as a (subjective) sign system. Apartheid was legitimised to whites initially through the discourse of racial superiority; then in the '80s on the basis of `the same but different', and in the late '80s in terms of `cultural difference'. This semantic engineering (which never achieved its hegemonic purpose) characterised the discursive struggles of the 1980s. The primary purpose was to mask overt racism under Western liberal discursive terms like `protection of minorities', `multiculturalism', `own affairs', `own kind of development' and so on. But in South Africa, these terms always had a racial/ethnic content. `Minority rights', for example, simply meant the retention of `white' political control, especially over which `group' (i.e. race) may live and work where (bantustans, `white' South Africa etc).

Signs have a `material' basis (Vološinov, 1973:11) and are produced within an historical material context (Vološinov, 1973:21). When Vološinov (1973:23) speaks of the sign as "an arena of class struggle", he is **not**, however, talking in terms of a materialist (economistic) reductionism in which language (sign systems) is reduced to a one-on-one relationship with `class'. Apartheid, for example, was never an exclusively economic-class phenomenon; it also contained a (subjective) racist `belief', which may have had its origins in economics, but which eventually took on a `life of its own'.

Materialist interests then took on subjective properties inside the mind of those interpellated into an apartheid subjectivity. Apartheid discourse was articulated into the modernist architectural styles and incorporated into monument and memorial design. The imagery of modernism resembles the heaviness of steam engines, for example, the concrete wagon at Blood River which commemorates the 1838 trekker victory, and the huge concrete Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria which looks like a huge mausoleum.

Apartheid, then, was more than just racism. It was a racial-capitalism (Saul and Gelb 1980) which legitimised particular economic, political, social, spatial and `national' arrangements. A new policy on national symbols therefore requires that the government of national unity replace not only apartheid language, which had made whole categories of words masking racism appear natural and God-given, but that it also reorder the apartheid political economy. The need for this discursive reorganisation of meanings extends to social and cultural conceptions of cultural symbols, museums and monuments.

For the purpose of this study, the semiotics of apartheid is the study of the interpenetration of the psyche (subject), the material (object) and (historical material) context. In other words, the semiotics of apartheid would examine:

<u>Psyche (Subject)</u>

*how racist discourse became naturalised as the way things are and should be;

*how internalisation of this discourse by individuals, classes and groups was translated into the discourses of `tribalism', `cultural difference', `ethnicity' and racism.

<u>Material (Object)</u>

*How racial discourse was `materialised' into political and social practices and state and business bureaucracies across South Africa between 1948 and 1990. Five years after the unbanning of the liberation movements (in February 1990) and one year after the first universal franchise elections, the material infrastructure of apartheid remained evident. For instance, the bantustan education systems and the Tricameral Parliament's division of education infrastructures into `white', `coloured' and `Asian', each administered by bureaucrats co-opted from each of the `race' groups, each teaching racist histories and `tribal' languages machined out of apartheid semantics, was replaced by a single educational administration only in March 1995. This discursive legacy arose out of the 19 Departments and 19 Ministers of Education (white, Coloured, Asian, Zulu, Xhosa etc) who materialised this ideology under apartheid.

*How the specific material object - racial capitalism - arose out of particular politico-economic, social and psychological conditions fashioned by colonialism, neo-colonialism and fractions of capital within the state. And in terms of these,

Historical Material (Context)

*how did local capital and the international imperatives of Western monopoly capital benefit from, and give support to, racial capitalism? How did capital legitimise its own complicity in apartheid to its owners, governments and their respective constituencies? In other words, why is racial-capitalism not acceptable in South Africa when a class-based capitalism (often also identified in racial terms) is acceptable in Western countries? (see Louw and Tomaselli 1991).

Monuments as Discourse

Monuments are one way that preferred cultural meanings about history and power are articulated into a group's consciousness. They are made to intersect with official discourses of history, religion and education which are materialised through school systems, media and religion. Nazism, for example, practised the aestheticisation of politics. In so doing, it met the German populace's hunger for meaning after the great depression of the 1930s. As collective choreography, both Nazism and Fascism beautified the technology of war through their propaganda agencies and self-obsessed rituals of self-congratulation.[2]

The similarities between the Nazi aestheticising of the technology of war with that of the South African militarised state of the 1980s are not that hard to find. Most Cinema, newspapers, magazines and other media, including those which opposed apartheid such as the liberal English Press, lent themselves to this task of romanticising the military during the 1980s when the PW Botha government popularised military imagery in fighting what it called the communist-inspired 'total onslaught' (Tomaselli 1984).

Discourses of aesthetics and politics are inextricably intertwined. Military parades and memorial rituals, especially those occurring against the backdrop of national monuments, become reaffirming ideological seances to impress the public of the unity and strength of the state, the authority of social cohesion, and the power of the hegemonic political will.

Sign Communities

Vološinov (1973:23) explicitly states that class struggle takes place "within one and the same sign community". South Africa as a single geographical entity, for example, forms one such sign community, even though the apartheid regime believed that it consisted of a number of different, even incompatible, sign communities. These were materialised through the bantustan system, the populations of each homeland being forced to speak different languages. These languages were disarticulated from common linguistic bases and rearticulated into the discourse of cultural difference and racial and ethnic incompatibility. Thus, some have argued that South and North Sotho as languages were disarticulated from each other via the schooling systems, state broadcasting, state language bureaux and so on (see, eg., Alexander 1989). Cultural and ethnic separation was in this way articulated via linguistic differences.

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[2]. This insight was provided by Jan Nederveen Pieterse.

If the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM), as an opposing sign-community, was to be successful in contesting National Party (NP) hegemony, especially when the conflict reached the `negotiation-phase' as it did in early 1990, it had to take heed of both the rhetoric and the deeper material interests of those class fractions which benefitted from apartheid.

Ideological (eg. linguistic) shifts are best changed in tandem with material structures such as the economy, urban infrastructures and work practices; otherwise the destruction of apartheid monuments alone will not serve any purpose. The residual discourse will clash with the material changes, as the East Europeans discovered in the glasnost era.

The Sign as the Arena of Social Struggle

Meanings are not fixed. They are dynamic and may even be contradictory. In South Africa, the meanings of specific signs are continually shifting and being shifted. Even Afrikaner Nationalism has not been a static ideology. Struggles within Afrikanerdom to appropriate monuments, language and other discourses to serve fractional interests have been common. Each class, class fraction and trans-class alliance within Afrikanerdom comprised an identifiable sign community. Each of these has, at different times, claimed sole `ownership' of Afrikaner Nationalist monuments.

This struggle between fractions of Afrikanerdom over symbolic ownership was a classic semantic tussle. It involved processes of articulation and disarticulation within what had been, between the National Party's 1948 accession to power and 1978, a largely unified sign community. In the latter year, the imperatives of capital and labour power, and contradictions internal to apartheid, began to over-ride the superstructural dominance of apartheid ideology. Language and beliefs (i.e. subjective) had lost sight of the material needs of a changing economy which now needed to discard the overt racism that had characterised the dominant ideology until then.

The basic processes pertinent to this relexification of language from a crude brutally enforced apartheid discourse to one of relative incorporation and inducing of consent, were as follows:

**semantic engineering*. By excluding, for example, the genitive apostrophe from the word *people's* (as in *peoples'*), the state's language planners encoded/articulated the idea of `nations', `races', and `genetic units' connected to hereditary `homelands'. Thus, when state officials talked about `peoples', they intended foreigners to understand this use in conventional terms. This was necessary to convince the world after 1979 that `apartheid was dead'. But the racist sub-text was understood, intuitively and sometimes explicitly, by all South Africans.

**Wilful co-option of counter-hegemonic terms* that became troublesome to the existing order occurred. Prime examples included the government/capital alliance's attempts to use for their own purposes terms organic to the discourse of the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) like `non-racial' and `community'. The Movement encoded into `non-racial' a content that assumed a transformed unified society, not one just without racism. In contrast, the government meant, until early 1990, a class-based multi-racialism where `groups' (i.e. `races') were permitted to integrate in the work place, in leisure and some living spaces, but not in state schools, white residential areas, state health facilities, and so on.

The racially integrated areas and activities were administered by `General Affairs' bureaucrats, while the segregated areas and activities came under the `Own Affairs' administrations of the `white', `coloured' and `Indian' Houses within the Tricameral Parliament, and the bantustans.

The shift in discursive logic popularised by the NP government after February 1990 had to be complemented with the dismantling of `Own' and `General' Affairs Departments within the state. Although this material bureaucratic manifestation had begun to be replaced with unitary structures by March 1995, changes in both structures and ideological discourse that underpinned them were still in sharp contestation.

*`Community' was a euphemism for `apartheid' (or sign community) as the state's definition statistically aggregated `communities' in terms of `race', language and ethnicity, irrespective of geographical, cultural or class differences.

*The equation of `national' with race/ethnicity/language/ homeland compartmentalised and fragmented conservation and monuments: `white' museum collections (and monuments) in white museums administered by the House of Assembly; `Indian' collections in Indian museums administered by the House of Delegates; and `coloured' collections in coloured museums, falling under the House of Representatives. `Black' collections were not at issue in `white' South Africa as they fell under the Bantustan governments.

Balances of Power and Monuments

A national monuments policy cannot be understood outside discussion of the balance of power within a society at specific historical conjunctures. Further, the analysis must account for shifts in the balance of power over time. By virtue of the political power which the colonists' had captured from 1652 on, all symbols which could have celebrated black history were either neglected or relegated to certain discursive sites, for example, Shaka's grave was placed under the KwaZulu bantustan administration.

The following periodisation examines the relationships between particular historical periods and monuments' construction:

*British rule was ascendant at the Cape between 1806, when it took the colony over from the Dutch, and 1836, when numerous parties of Dutch descendants trekked north to escape expanding British hegemony. The first monuments to be declared were in the Cape, and thus reflect a `British world'. 75% of NMC declarations are in the former Cape province. The remaining monuments are distributed between the other three provinces, the Free State containing less than 5% (Hall and Lillie 1992). The NMC explain this bias by pointing out that the Cape was the place where the first colonial settlement took place and therefore it contains the "largest repository of our conservation - worthy built heritage" (Hall and Lillie 1992:12). The question that then arises is who decides what is important to our history? In the light of this, it is not surprising that so many white South Africans believed that South African history begins with the arrival of Jan Van Riebeeck from Holland in 1652.

*The 1830s until 1902 was a period of a struggle over power. The Great Trek of 1836 into the interior altered the previous balance of power in South Africa. The British defeated the Pedi and Zulu in 1879. Then the British defeated the Boers in 1902. No monuments to these British victories were ever built.

The lack of monuments to victories by one group over others could demonstrate something significant about power relations. The `victorious' have never been fully victorious. The balance of power is never fully tipped in one direction only. The `defeated' are never fully defeated. Hence, the victorious in any epoch cannot afford to antagonise those they have conquered by erecting monuments to their victories.[3]

*Between 1902 and the Second World War the character of the `jingoism' associated with the British imperial era was also reflected in the monuments built. This jingoism was not a white South African `nationalism' per se. It was rather tied to a celebration of `Empire' rather than `nation'. `Imperial'/`jingo' monuments are associated with British colonial victories, Empire, the Empire's wars, monarchy, and colonisation (eg. Anglo-Zulu War battle sites; Queen Victoria statues; First World War monuments, etc). They thus reflected the historical balance of power in which British interests predominated in South Africa.

*Monuments built from the 1950s to the 1970s reflect Afrikaner Nationalism **OR** ethnic separateness (English, Zulu, etc) as encouraged by the NP (eg. Shaka Monument), **OR** glorify white South African history in general (eg. Eastern Cape Frontier Wars monuments).

The move to Republic in 1961 necessitated a redefinition of the purpose of Afrikaner monuments, such as indicating Afrikanerdom as dominant, as living and as future - for example, an ultra-modern monument was built to commemorate the Afrikaans language in Paarl, near Cape Town.

Afrikaner Nationalist monuments associated with this period are actually monuments to the growing security of Afrikaner power (eg. Blood River is a monument to this era rather than a monument to the 19th Century battle!). Significantly, Afrikaner Nationalists left even derogatory British imperial / jingo / monarchist monuments intact (eg. statues in Pietermaritzburg, Durban, Cape Town, battle sites, etc) even though they were implacably opposed to what these monuments represented. This live-and-let live policy was possibly part of a process of cooptation of English South Africans whose support the NP needed. Further, other discursive `silences' exist - for example, no monument was ever built to commemorate Afrikanerdom's greatest victory against the British at Majuba in 1879.

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[3]. For example, the British antagonised the defeated Afrikaners by removing Paul Kruger's statue from Church Square, Pretoria, after the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). This caused much resentment and Afrikaner Nationalists, of course, returned it to its original location after 1948. The monument was thereby reappropriated as a means of discursive mobilisation by Afrikaner Nationalists, and in the 1980s right-wing Afrikaners disarticulated this and similar monuments from the National Party whom they now saw as traitors to the Afrikaner cause, the white race and history.

*The years between 1974 and 1989 saw a tripling of the number of monuments declared: "The increase ... is reflective of the economic peak that South Africa was experiencing, and the fact that Afrikaner nationalism was still on the rise and was very successful" (Levitz 1992:66).

*The post-1994 scenario is dominated by the ANC. The ANC's concept of `nationalism' is a quest for `national unity' within a framework of majority rule. The ANC's Policy for Transformation of Heritage Resources states "Heritage institutions, intentionally or otherwise, fail to foster national consciousness based on the historical fact that all South Africans have a common history and destiny" (Sirayi 1993:1). The ANC could find itself pressurised to destroy or scale-down emphases on "racist, sexist, elitist, eurocentric, alienated and irrelevant" "monuments of privilege" to contribute to their `nation building' discourse (Sirayi 1993:1). However, ANC policy also calls for "Re-assessment of the existing memorials to ensure that they foster reconstruction and reconciliation" (Sirayi 1993:5).

History as a Discursive Resource

History is built by the collective actions and struggles of peoples, classes, groups and constituencies. This is history as Process. But History as Record is woven by those who wield political power. In political power games, History is a heavily politicised resource deployed when there is need to justify authority and establish legitimacy. The present is made to match the past, all in an effort to legitimise dominance of the articulating power bloc. The state (as appropriated by those in power), is thus a theatre of fantasy where wishful imagination or `willed' ideology reigns supreme.

Monuments are part of the Historical Record of hegemonic representation. Historical representation is a resource whenever ideological legitimacy and identity are contested by groups opposed to each other. Public space is an effective place to assert ideology. As Robert Thornton (1991:25) argues: "public spaces are the most visible and vicious aspects of the enforcement of apartheid, precisely because they are the most powerful places in terms of which the polity is imagined, conceived and represented." Monument building is one way in which power inscribes itself in distinct procedures and institutions. Power, observes Achille Mbembe (1992), traces itself in privileged spaces.

In discussing power in the post-colonial situation, Mbembe uses such theatrically related words as `grotesque' and `obscene'. He also talks of pomp and sumptuousness as "classical ingredients in the production of power". In periods when nations are overwhelmed by a sense of acute national crisis, History as Record is a source of certainty and reassurance. Any anxiety as to what the future holds stimulates a scramble to appropriate the past and rearticulate it in terms of current needs. As Frank Furedi (1992) argues, the questioning of identities, values and traditions inevitably leads to the reworking of the past. Thus the need to appropriate the past as one's own and to rearticulate meaning is always necessitated by the exigencies of the present.

If History is a Resource and a tool, no nation's history is unproblematic. As in the case of any other resource, there is, in any society, a struggle to monopolise this resource. This is particularly so in situations where there is no ready acceptance of common roots and values by people constituting a `nation'. This, tragically, is the scenario in South Africa.

In discussing the issue of monuments, one has to take cognisance of the fact that historically, they are part and parcel of the contestation for power. They are a physical manifestation of competing Histories of Record. Competing histories are themselves ways of staking claims to society's resources - especially the power resource. In September 1993, for example, the question over who `owns' the image of Shaka was highlighted when a squabble broke out between the ANC and Inkatha over who should initiate and preside over celebrations in Zululand coinciding with Shaka Day. A spokesman for the chiefs complained that the Zulu chief who had allied himself with the ANC on the festival had "accepted to be used by enemies of KwaZulu to work as an agent provocateur for violence and allowed himself to be a tool for sowing seeds of division among the Zulus with a hope to paralyse and flush KwaZulu from the face of the earth" (**Natal Witness**, Sept 21, 1993:1). This response from KwaZulu is basically an argument over history as a resource, a mobilising force, and as a means to facilitate ideological closure within constituencies. It is an example of the way in which Apartheid policies of ethnic fragmentation have spread to the `ethnicisation' of history by ethno-political parties which emerged in Group Areas territories like KwaZulu.

Whilst the need to assert one's roots and identities cannot and should not be denied, one could say that with the ascent of Afrikaner political power in 1948, the History of South Africa became overwhelmingly politicised within a single narrow, racist discourse or articulation. Anxious to ensure the growth and survival of the Afrikaner volk, Afrikaner Nationalism recuperated and discursively mobilised aspects of its otherwise forgotten past for its own purposes at different times. These have sometimes been successful, sometimes not.

The construction of monuments became one way of recovering and representing history not just as a way of commemorating the past, but as a method of exorcising the demons of the present - it was an attempt to establish hope for the future as far as whites were concerned.

The irony of monuments lies in their purposes. They could celebrate victories but, fundamentally, they are an expression of a deep anxiety - a need for both a subjective and objective justification for historical and political action. The younger the nation the more and bigger its monuments.

The National Monuments Council

The National Monuments Council (NMC) is the statutory body involved in declaring national monuments. This body is the official institution empowered by the state to ensure the conservation of South Africa's historical and cultural heritage through various categories of statutory protection.

The heritage that the NMC claimed to conserve includes:

> those buildings, works, places and objects which are associated - on national, regional or local levels - with people and events in our history or prehistory, our social and cultural activities (such as religion, art and economics), the development of technical and scientific knowledge or artifacts which are aesthetically pleasing, for example, art, architecture or craftsmanship" (Levitz 1992).

It is important to look at what actually was preserved. Frescura (1992) informs us that of a total of 97% of all declared monuments reflect the values of the white community, whilst the remaining 3% represent the art, architecture and artifacts of 84% of the country's population. The majority of the locations preserved for black cultures include archaeological sites and San rock art, thereby perpetuating white stereotypes of indigenous South Africans as a group of rural and poorly educated peasants possessing little material culture of any note. The percentage of the population groups can be broken down further as follows:

Dutch - including Voortrekker, Boer and Huguenot - 33%
Afrikaner - 20th century - 17%
English - including colonial, imperial and 1820 settlers - 37%
All other whites - 10%
Black-including all indigenous Indian, Malay, slave and Griqua groupings 3%

Understandably, many black artifacts are transient and ephemeral. Nonetheless there is more than 3% of sites which can be recorded and are enduring (Levitz 1992).

No less than 66% of monuments occur in urban areas. These include structures which exhibit modern or high technology. The choice of these artifacts gives prominence to the ideas of the white emergence in South Africa. According to Frescura (1992) this tendency is also indicative of the officials of NMC originating from urban, white, bourgeois backgrounds, with little inclination, knowledge or travel budgets to venture beyond the city confines.

Many important monuments and historical sites illustrating black experiences have been ignored. By ignoring the material culture of groups of people their histories have been disregarded and portrayed as inferior and static. From the material culture preserved in South Africa, it would appear that blacks did not have a culture before the arrival of whites. More important is the fact that sites which are important to current black history have been neglected, thereby belittling their historical and cultural achievements.

Current Debates and Perspectives

In examining the question of national monuments within a reconciliatory spirit, which later could develop into a common South African identity, we need to ask as Farieda Khan (1992:1) does: Who owns the past? Whose heritage should be conserved? And, finally, who decides these questions?

Khan (1992:7) suggests that a new approach should "not glorify the colonial conquest of the past, nor perpetuate the racial divisions of the present" but "accurately reflect our country's history and to celebrate its cultural achievements".

In Bulgaria and in Zimbabwe, when governments changed hands some heritage structures were destroyed whilst others were left intact. In Bulgaria, ideologically loaded symbols like the statue of Lenin were destroyed because they symbolised Soviet domination over the Bulgarians. It is significant, however, that those monuments built to show the Bulgarians' appreciation of the Russian' military assistance, in the wars against the Ottoman Empire, were not removed.

In Zimbabwe, even though there were fewer colonial monuments, some that were representative of the colonial conquest remained intact. At the same time the history of resistance to colonialism through armed struggle has been recouped by constructing a Heroes Acre to commemorate those who fell on the battle-fields of the wars of liberation.

Problems that should be considered in attempts to preserve our heritage are the feelings of hostility towards the concept of heritage and History as Record of white, especially Afrikaner exploits which exists in many black communities. The roots of this are the "glorification of the colonial heritage" which, in the black communities, is "associated with conquest, dispossession, slavery, dominance and control - an era based on the assumptions of white supremacy" (Khan 1992:9).

The effects of cultural alienation in black communities induces many to miss the aesthetic quality of the structures themselves. Khan (1992:10) observes that because South Africans are "struggling to throw-off the psychological shackles of a regime which tried to legitimatise an ideology based on the acceptance of black inferiority, it would be as well to treat feelings of hostility towards heritage conservation with great sensitivity".

Another problem is antagonism towards heritage conservation fuelled by the forced removals of large numbers of black South Africans through the application of the Group Areas Act which resulted in the destruction of community identity rooted in a strongly felt "sense of place". This dispossession had an enormous impact in the "obliteration of memories"(Khan 1992:11).

The alienation of blacks from the urban environment as a result of influx control policies and discriminatory land legislation which enforced segregation by race (Kahn:1992:12).

What then does Khan offer as a viable alternative? She proposes four major lines of action:

*formulation of a culturally multi-faceted, new policy on heritage conservation;

*broad-based community participation and access to a diverse range of ideas, values and perspectives;

*new policies that are particularly sensitive to the politico-historical symbols deemed to be important by communities whose values have been hitherto ignored; and

*the necessity of relating heritage conservation to basic needs, such as housing and basic rights, such as the right to education.

Conclusion

What direction South Africa takes as a `nation' will largely depend on negotiations the balance of power and how this is mediated through ongoing negotiations. The construction of `national' monuments suggests a shared history and a common vision of the future. As has been discussed, broad patterns at work in South African society still reflect a bitter contestation as to what constitutes the South African nation. Such a lack of broad consensus as to what constitutes the nation has a direct bearing on what has to be considered as significant in the history of the nation. The problem is that in looking back at historical actions, one person's hero is another's villain. Simplistically put, monuments assert the issue of who is good and who is bad.

Monuments and all national symbols should sensitively reflect a fine dialectic between preservation and change, individual identities and collective destiny, difference and a core commonality. These should be

South Africa's creative tensions. An ontological reading of the emergent South African nation should not be afraid to take difference into account. Thus the discourse of the `nation' has to see difference as also constitutive of the nation. Conceptualised thus, history is deployed as a tool for positive unity and reconciliation. The problem with the apartheid Monuments policy is that it tried to banish other South African historic actors. If it included them, it was as the `other' - specifically a separate or enemy `other' whose aspirations were obviously in contradistinction to `us'.

Heritage conservation can only be meaningful within a vibrant and dynamic cultural policy. This policy should top the list of cultural questions that need to be addressed. This is because monuments, as very visible symbols, can be utilised to shape South African consciousness along new forms of common destiny which will stress reconciliation and reconstruction. Reconciliation should not be seen from a utopian perspective. To argue for a re-articulation of monuments so that they stress a common destiny is not a call to deny difference or romanticise unity. As noted above, difference in South Africa is an intrinsic feature of the society. But this difference should not be allowed to mean separates as apartheid would have had us believe.

The preservation of monuments, past and new, should be informed by the nation's confidence in the strength of the democratic ideas that survived and nurtured themselves, even in the dark ages of apartheid. When democratic practice becomes part of the common sense of the nation's culture, then people cease to be afraid of representations of difference.

It is understandable why people would like to do away with symbols associated with the nightmares of apartheid's grand designs of racial domination. But this would be a convenient way of dealing with the nation's problems of self-perceptions. The destruction of monuments will not make apartheid's history disappear. That history is not written in textbooks or monuments alone. It is constituted in the memories of orphans and other survivors, mothers and fiances who lost their beloved ones before their time. It is there that the large sectors of the public memory that the most monstrous monuments of apartheid have been architectured.

We also need monuments which celebrate black (i.e. coloured, Indian and African) struggles and achievements. They have re-accessed themselves to their living heroes like Nelson Mandela. Therefore this period should witness the rehabilitation and decriminalisation of black heroes. Monument construction, from now on, however, should not parrot the apartheid game of turning history into some morality play of good versus evil. Let the monuments landscape show all the warts and blemishes of the society as it really is.

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